

The Present Chinese Province

The China Province that I was assigned to at the General Chapter was not the regular country, for foreigners were not readily invited into mainland China. We had started this mission on May 18, 1891, and the Province was going quite well. The initial Marist Brothers were French, Italian, and English and were dedicated to the Christian education of youth as well as spreading the already very popular devotion to Mary. Our Marist Brothers were anxious to spread the Word of God there and to serve a people. The Brothers faced the bitterness against organized religion and would stop at nothing to carry on the Word of the Lord and devotion to his beloved Mother Mary. The first few foreigners who had come to serve the people were very quickly popular with these people, but the government did not particularly like this.

The Chinese were very diligent and eager to complete their training and courses. Some of the children of foreigners joined the new Marist schools where children could become fluent in French, Spanish, and English. The schools started slowly and after a few years were recognized as top quality and were much in demand. The Marists' first endeavors were mostly in Beijing and Shanghai. Their growing popularity soon caused them to be in demand everywhere. A group of our French Brothers also started a small winery that soon became quite popular as well as a source of revenue.

One of the characteristics of our Marist teachers is an attachment to and a genuine interest in the progress of their students. And that same spirit was soon spread into all the various schools where we were at work. When the government became hostile and wanted to get rid of these popular missionaries, many went to Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Singapore. But their Marist loyalty was always evident, and they were eager to help out and find jobs for any of their alumni. They all pulled together, students and teachers, and soon continued their practice in the various countries they emigrated to. It was a quickly recognized and appreciated loyalty that bound all Marists together as they left to help settle a new China with the help of alumni. That same spirit was very evident in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and Malaysia and became a hallmark of the Marist family. Often, a quick review of the enrollment would turn up many friends from China.

After the trouble with the government started and it wanted to get rid of foreigners, it became impossible for me ever to visit mainland China. So we used to go over to the dividing ridge where there was a small public park where we could privately recite our rosary for the Marists on the mainland as we faced China. I had been told that I would never be able to get into China, but we still had a few native-born Marist Brothers who had been sentenced to prison and had finished serving their sentences. They were living as refugees in their own country, often hidden by their families to protect them.

One of these Marists had started a school and taught classes in the evening. I was determined to go to see him and to meet those he was living with, but was unable to do so until 1982 when I was no longer Assistant. I managed to visit our beloved Brother Damien who has now come to Hong Kong to rest for the few years that he had remaining. I managed to spend a full day visiting with our Brother Damien when I came as a visitor and in Hong Kong. I was asked to be a helper and take care of a group of some 200 tourists visiting the mainland. As a monitor I had twenty-four tourists to keep track of. Thus I was finally able to visit mainland China even if I was no longer in charge of it and this pleased me tremendously.

Only God knows fully and accurately the many years of sacrifice suffered by our Marist Brothers, their alumni, and other foreign students. Our Brothers had been persecuted during the Boxer Rebellion, in which a good number of our Marist Brothers and some of their students were killed.

A much more recent death was that of Bro. Joche Albert. He was the Brother who had prepared many young men and women to join the Legion of Mary. Brother Joche was their mentor who trained them and inspired them by his own example. It was on April 21, 1951, that he was jailed along with some twenty-four members of the Legion of Mary. They were brought to a public place in Sichang, China, and the people of the area were obliged to attend and to witness how the Chinese government dealt with these Legion students. In a public park the people of the area were required to watch as the soldiers killed every one of the twenty-four Legion students and then finally shot Bro. Joche Albert, who had been made to watch the execution of his dear students.

Our famous winery is still in operation by the Chinese who had kept the Brothers on as long as they needed them to learn the trade and then dismissed them. The Chinese had already taken all of our buildings but had not managed to win over the Legion of Mary. If one would like to get an idea of the extent of our Marist work for China, he has only to go over to our residence at Flower Road in Singapore, which was our residence there for a number of years. There one will see walls full of the most beautiful and gigantic photos of the Marist Juniors, Brothers, Superiors, and school students all gathered for the many religious functions annually at that time.

In the early 1950s during the persecution, when China was sending out as many natives as possible, we had a large number of Chinese students who also managed to escape. They came to attend courses at Marist College, and some fifty or so graduated. Most of these Brothers have gone back to serve in our various schools of the China Province; others have gone to Australia and other countries, and one of these original graduates of Marist College is still actively teaching in one of the American schools. The blood of martyrs fertilizes the seedlings that spread our Catholic faith. And if one of these Chinese is still active here with us today, only God knows how many expatriated mainland Chinese await the call to return to China. They will answer that call and come from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore, Sarawak, and all the various corners of the globe to assure that the Catholic Church is still very much alive. Let us join with the Marist Brothers around the whole world who came from mainland China, and may that huge number of Marist Brothers unite daily to sing together once more our own glorious hymn, "Salve Regina!"